

Obtaining a Diagnosis of Lupus Can Be Difficult

There are many challenges in confirming that a person has lupus and not some other disease. Lupus is sometimes called "the great imitator," because its symptoms mimic many other illnesses. Also, lupus symptoms can be unclear, can come and go, and can change.

No single laboratory test can determine whether a person has lupus.

A variety of laboratory tests are used to detect physical changes or conditions in the body that can occur with lupus. Each test result adds more information to the body of evidence that a doctor uses to determine if a person has lupus. However, lupus cannot be diagnosed solely on lab work.

- Test results that suggest lupus can be due to other illnesses, or can even be seen in healthy people.
- A test result may be positive one time and negative another time.
- Different laboratories may produce different test results.

Therefore, a lupus diagnosis is made by a careful review of:

- a person's current symptoms,
- laboratory test results,
- medical history, and
- the medical history of close family members (grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins).

All of this information may be necessary for a doctor to make a diagnosis of lupus because, for a number of reasons, laboratory tests alone cannot give a definite "yes" or "no" answer. It may take months or even years for doctors to piece together evolving symptoms to accurately diagnose lupus.

How Do Physicians Diagnose Lupus?

Physicians use a list of 11 criteria to help diagnose lupus. A person needs to satisfy at least 4 out of the 11 criteria before the diagnosis can be pinpointed.

Of the 11 criteria, 7 relate to symptoms, and 4 have to do with lab tests. The anti-nuclear antibody (ANA) test is used as a screening test for lupus. We know that 95 % of people with lupus have a positive ANA. Therefore, if a person has many symptoms of systemic lupus and their ANA test is negative, that's generally regarded as pretty good evidence against lupus being the explanation for the symptoms they are having.

If on the other hand, if the ANA test comes back positive, that IS NOT proof of lupus. The positive ANA is only an indicator; it is not diagnostic. A positive ANA can be found in a number of illnesses and conditions. In fact, many people may have positive lupus tests-particularly the anti-nuclear antibody test-and yet they do NOT have the disease.

NOTE: The Lupus Foundation of America is currently funding research to revise and validate the diagnosis criteria for lupus.

Resources on www.lupus.org:

- [Learn more about symptoms of lupus](#)
- [Learn more about laboratory test used to diagnose lupus](#)
- [Could you have lupus? interactive tool and symptoms checklist](#)
- [Learn more about lupus](#)